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Strengthening the OSCE Response to Trafficking in Human Beings

Train Flight Attendants, Others, and Create Unified Hot Line

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Special Representative of the OSCE PA on Human Trafficking Issues

Co-Chairman of the United States Helsinki Commission

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Kiev, Ukraine

In January of 2000, I received actionable information that eight Ukrainian women were being exploited by sex traffickers in two bars in Montenegro. The women had been lured there with promises of legitimate work, then forced into prostitution. One desperate victim, however, called her mother for help using the phone of one of the men exploiting her.

When informed, I immediately called the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Filip Vujanovic, who personally ordered an immediate raid on the bar. As a result, seven of the eight women were rescued and returned to their families in Ukraine. Tragically, the eighth woman was trafficked to Albania prior to the raid.

Combatting modern-day slavery is everybody's business. We are all in this together. Cooperation and coordination are key to mitigating—and someday ending—the cruelty of human trafficking. Best practices need to be shared and implemented to the widest extent possible.

I would like to especially thank Chair-in-Office Leonid Kozhara for convening this conference and for personally advocating highly effective, low cost strategies including training flight attendants and others to better recognize and report a potential trafficking situation as it is happening—on an airliner or bus or train or in a hotel.

Earlier today, Ukraine hosted its first flight crew anti-trafficking training. Flight attendants, customs officials, airport police, airline representatives, and many others received training on how to spot both victim and perpetrator and what next steps need to be taken.

Situation awareness and the training to confidently know what to do and when will save thousands of victims' lives. Flight attendants are in the unique position—especially on long flights—to observe a potential trafficking in progress and then call a trafficking hotline or inform the pilot to radio ahead so that the proper authorities intervene as they deplane.

Over time—and as the pimps and exploiters get caught and jailed—the added positive consequence of trained flight attendants and others will have a profound chilling effect on the traffickers' ability to move victims from one place to another. The current-day risk to a trafficker of getting caught transporting a victim or victims is pathetically small. And they know it. You and I have the ability to change that.

In July of 2010, I chaired a conference in Washington, D.C., to bring together the relevant U.S. agencies, such as Customs and Border Patrol, various US airlines, and non-governmental organizations to focus on interdicting traffickers by training others to know the signs. Speakers including Deborah Sigmund, founder of an NGO called Innocents at Risk, explained how flight attendants were the “first line of defense” in the fight against human trafficking.

Flight attendant Nancy Rivard, President of Airline Ambassadors International—a humanitarian NGO that provides humanitarian aid to children and families in need as well as relief and development to under-privileged communities worldwide—told us how she and other flight attendants compared notes one day and were shocked—and dismayed—how often they had noticed what they suspected was a trafficked woman or child on their flight but had no training or protocol to do something about it. Nancy has been doing a great deal about it ever since and has personally helped rescue trafficked women—and train others to do the same.

One of the earliest successes of the program was a call Nancy placed to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security regarding a child she had seen on her flight from the Dominican Republic to Boston. That tip led to the break-up of a trafficking ring that had transported 82 children to the United States.

Ms. Rivard will give a keynote address during the first session. Please listen to her. And act.

Just this year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began coordinating with the airlines and is in the process of releasing the Blue Lightning program to domestic U.S. airlines. DHS has developed a hotline, and training will soon be occurring across the United States. I intend to host one this fall in an airport in my home state of New Jersey.

And with minimal modifications, the training is also easily adaptable to bus drivers and station operators, train conductors, trucking associations, and other transportation industry professionals. It also fits well with the emerging anti-trafficking commitment and training in the hospitality industry. Hotel chains including Hilton Worldwide, Hyatt, Accor, Carlson, Hotelplan Suisse, Wyndham, Sabre Holdings Corporation, Kuoni Travel, and many others have committed to training their employees.

The OSCE annex to the Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings will soon be updated. I hope you'll agree that this "best practice" training initiative must be included, be prominent, and thoroughly implemented. Indeed, this effort requires almost no cost, just the will to do it. For the sake of the victims—and their grieving families left behind—the OSCE, and all of our governments, at all levels, can and must make this a priority.

I mentioned earlier how I received actionable information because a victim in Montenegro was able to call her mom for help in Ukraine. I propose a new OSCE initiative—a single, unified hotline. Many of the countries represented here today have taken the much needed step of creating national hotlines. Let's build on that success and cooperate more robustly across borders. With a single trafficking hotline, travelers and transportation professionals can report suspected trafficking anytime, anywhere. A single hotline will assist victims anywhere, anytime.

And let me just add here, the importance of ensuring that the hotline connects good citizens and victims not only with law enforcement able to launch a rescue, but with the non-governmental organizations and faith-based organizations that will help victims rebuild their lives. I have been in faith-based shelters all over the world. I have seen how faith-based shelters are able to minister to the utter brokenness of the victims. When it comes to sheltering, governments need to partner with the faith-based community so that victims will be most effectively served.

My work in the struggle to end human trafficking began in the mid-1990s and led to my authorship of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TPVA) of 2000—America's landmark law to combat human trafficking. When I first introduced the TVPA in 1998 however, the legislation was met with a wall of skepticism and opposition. People both inside of government and out, thought the legislation's bold new strategy—including sheltering, asylum and other protections for the victims, long jail sentences and asset confiscation for the traffickers, and tough sanctions for governments that failed to meet minimum standards prescribed in the law—was merely a solution in search of a problem.

For most people at that time, the term trafficking applied almost exclusively to illicit drugs or weapons. Reports of vulnerable persons—especially women and children—being reduced to commodities for sale were often met with surprise, incredulity or indifference. It took two years to overcome opponents and muster the votes for passage and even overcoming opposition by the Clinton Administration.

Today, much progress has been made. Most countries in Europe—and many around the world—have enacted comprehensive laws to combat this preventable exploitation. Faithfully implementing those laws however—including in the United States—remains a serious challenge. Passage of legislation is only a step, albeit an important one.

All of us can and must do more. Training flight attendants—and others—and a unified hotline will save victims, boost convictions of the traffickers and deter these monstrous crimes.